

Shaping districts sets off tempers

Talks are tinged with race, politics

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BATON ROUGE — For all the talk of reaching across the aisle, the partisan scrum is under way in early days of the Legislature's special session to redraw political boundaries, with the battles affecting both congressional and legislative district lines.

And, as it often goes with party politics in Southern states, race is at the core of the debate.

As House members take the first committee votes on redrawing their own districts today, the chairman of the Legislative Democratic caucus warned Tuesday that failing to create a 30th minority district in the Shreveport area could lead federal authorities to reject the entire plan. And several rank-and-file Democrats are sounding alarms that the newly minted Republican majority is driving the process toward a partisan advantage.

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'It is getting personal'

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In the Senate, meanwhile, a long committee hearing on congressional maps grew more tense over the course of the day, with Chairman Robert Kostelka, R-Monroe, several times snapping at his colleagues, many of them African-American Democrats, who are pushing an east-west oriented north Louisiana district that would be more racially balanced than what Kostelka proposes. At one point, he sought to quiet Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, D-New Orleans, addressing her only as "little lady."

The chairman, backed by Gov. Bobby Jindal and at least four members of the congressional delegation, wants to maintain the status quo of two north Louisiana districts that divide the state into eastern and western jurisdictions, with both reaching well into south Louisiana.

House Democratic Chairman John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, stopped short of accusing Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, of an overtly partisan agenda in crafting legislative districts in the lower chamber. But he noted that several of the open questions — the debate over the number of majority nonwhite districts and whether two New Orleans-area Republicans are drawn into the same district — could end up playing into GOP hands.

"I'm not ready to scream yet," he said, though he conceded that some of his members feel more strongly about the matter.

Rep. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans, said the GOP House majority is trying to sew up its majority status in the House for the next decade by preserving Republican seats and creating new ones.

"It is getting personal," said Rep. Rickey Hardy, D-Lafayette. "They (Republicans) want to keep their turf intact."

"It is obvious what is happening," said Rep. Jerry "Truck" Gisclair, D-Larose. "We (Democrats) are secondary. It is being driven by the majority party, and that has an influence, (explaining) why people are jumping parties."

One of the chamber's new members, Rep. Wesley Bishop, D-New Orleans, said, "I hope that is not the final die that is cast. I was elected to the House of Representatives, not the House of Republicans or the House of Democrats."

Tucker has said throughout the session that his priority is to draw a map that satisfies the demands of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and that, as practically as possible, can meet the wishes of incumbents who wish to run for re-election. His map proposes 29 majority nonwhite districts, up from 27, and it would involve three head-to-head matchups, two pitting Democrats, one pitting Republicans.

But Edwards said a 30th majority nonwhite district can be drawn in Shreveport by diluting the percentage of African-Americans in the three majority nonwhite districts that Tucker has drawn around the city.

"My concern is that failure (to create a 30th African-American district) will guarantee we will not be pre-cleared by the (U.S.) Justice Department ... and they will kick it back to us," Edwards said. "This is an invitation to the Justice Department to scrutinize our plan. A minority district can be drawn."

Edwards, who like the speaker is white, noted that drawing the Shreveport region that way probably would pair two Shreveport-area Republicans, Richard Burford and Alan Seabaugh, in the same district. Edwards said the change also could have a domino effect, reversing a north Louisiana pairing of Democrats Chris Roy and James Armes in the same district that is included in the speaker's proposal.

Separately, Tucker has convened talks to avoid pitting Reps. John LaBruzzo, R-Metairie, and Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans. Democrats worry that the solution could end up pairing two of their members.

House redistricting Chairman Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, did not dispute contentions that a new map could help Republicans. But he expressed no surprise. "We are in a new environment," he said, noting the recent party switches that allowed the GOP majority. "To the victors go the spoils."

In the congressional map debate, party has not been explicitly invoked, but it is clearly at play as lawmakers discuss the distribution of African-American voters in north Louisiana. A Shreveport-Monroe district that is 42 percent African-American would clearly be competitive for a

Democrat, unlike the current configuration, which has yielded six white Republicans and one black Democrat, U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond of New Orleans.

Several congressmen testified Tuesday in favor of the existing configuration. Republicans Charles Boustany of Lafayette, Bill Cassidy

of Baton Rouge, Rodney Alexander of Quitman and John Fleming of Minden all argued for the current concept, even as Boustany and Cassidy complained of some of the consequences for south Louisiana.

None of them — or Kostelka — mentioned partisan influences. But Kostelka's frustrations

were visible and audible as other senators pressed their alternative bills, which the chairman had not distributed or scheduled for debate. He peppered Sen. Lydia Jackson, a Shreveport Democrat advocating for the more racially balanced district, with questions about her plan, asking, "How many congressmen have you talked to?" and "What about the governor? Have you heard what he said about my plan?"

Richmond, who attended

Kostelka's committee hearing along with several of his congressional colleagues, said afterward, "When it's Congress, party is always involved. That's obviously the main divide in Washington."

The chairman's tone drew rebukes from some of his colleagues. Peterson questioned whether Kostelka "is the right person with the right temperament for this job." Senate President Joel Chaisson II, D-Destrehan, said there would be no

changes in chairman assignments. "Everybody needs to take a step back. It's an emotional process. Everyone is working their way through it."

Kostelka's committee is scheduled to vote on a congressional plan Thursday.

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